

minds in motion

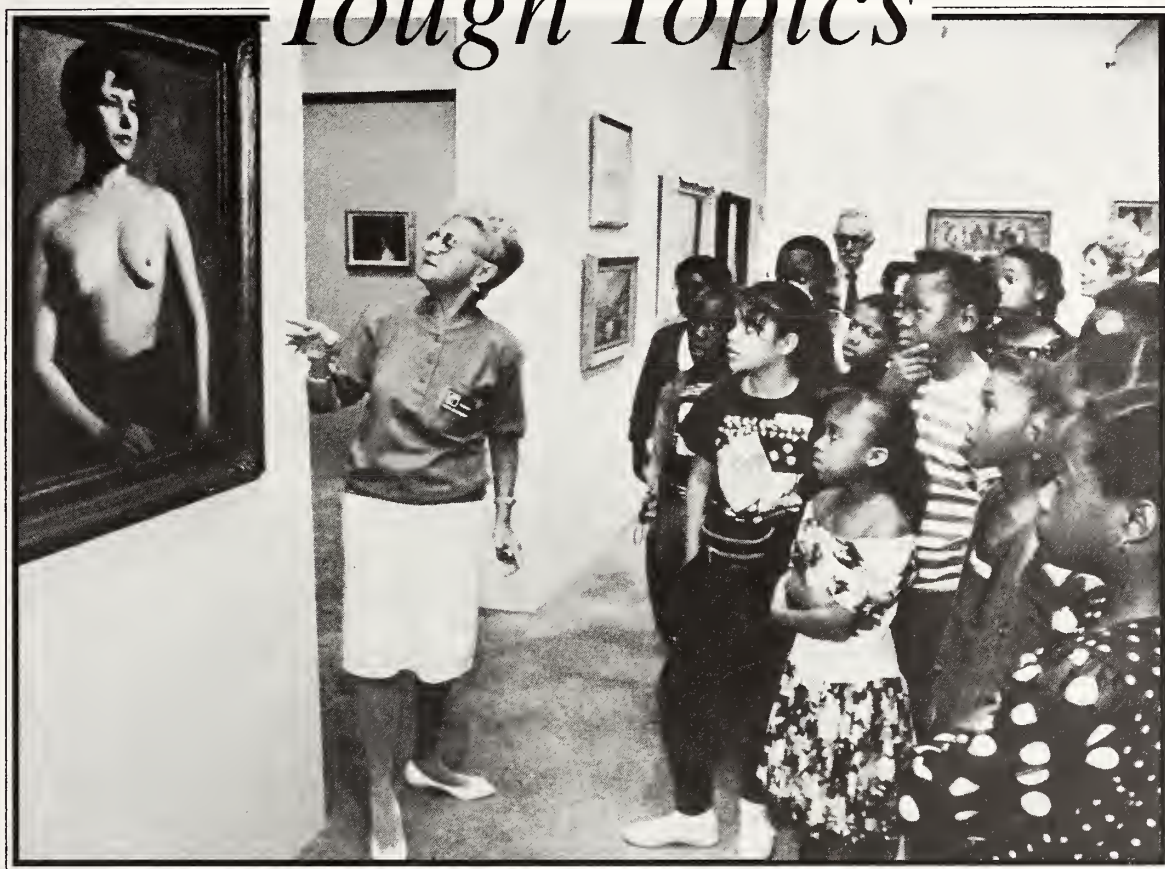
The Docent Educator

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The Quarterly Journal for Dedicated Docents

Spring 1993

Tough Topics



Within every institution are ideas and experiences so charged that they can prompt visitor reactions ranging from embarrassment to fervor. This issue examines several of these tough topics. Forewarned is forearmed!

Inside: The Naked Truth ▲ Staying Cool with Hot Issues ▲
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Cover: Docent Ruth Ratowsky was teaching elementary school children in the Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, (FL) when this picture was taken. The photo then appeared in the Miami Herald with the heading *HEY, MA, GUESS WHAT I SAW AT THE MUSEUM!*

photo: Bob Eighmie, Miami Herald staff

Tackling Tough Topics

Tough topics lie in wait. They are an inherent and ever-present risk when teaching with any institutional collection. Some can be anticipated; others just happen — a combustible combination of issues, personalities, and happenstance.

Tough topics by their very nature can prompt visitor reactions ranging from mild discomfort to outright vehemence. Whether they are perceived to be latent or overt, such issues as nudity, violence, sexism, racism, slavery, evolution, and animal captivity have the potential to ensnare docents in some rather uncomfortable situations.

Ordinarily, the potential for controversy surrounding tough topics remains dormant. Most visitors listen and respond to docents with interest and respect, even when they are experiencing some level of discomfort. However, young children who are unable to contain their reactions, zealots who do not wish to, and others who feel their beliefs are being challenged, may respond in ways that can unsettle prepared docents and make mincemeat of unwitting ones.

Teaching through a visitor's animated negative response or vocal challenge can be a docent's nightmare. No one wants to have a lesson disrupted in ways that are not productive, much less encounter hostility. Nonetheless, it is a fact that education and teaching are not immune to contemporary controversies — even in settings as seemingly benign as museums, zoos, or parks.

As it happens, museums, zoos, and parks are not above the fray, but often squarely in the middle of it. One need only think of the embroilment that took place over the Mapplethorpe photography exhibition, or the emotional entanglements surrounding the

ownership of sacred objects and artifacts of Native Americans, to realize how close to the “front lines” museums can be. And, since docents often represent the institutional front line with the general public, they are among those who experience the effects of such confrontations most directly.

A docent's first and best line of defense when confronted by a concerned, irate, or agitated visitor is to know the intent and purpose of the institution he or she represents. Only this information legitimately explains the reasons objects or life forms are collected and exhibited as they are and can appropriately shift the discussion away from a personal one.

While it is not necessarily appropriate for educational institutions, or those teaching within them, to tell visitors *what* to think, both share a responsibility to provide people with access to ideas and material evidence. It is the visitor's responsibility to put that information and experience into context and to construct meanings.

Institutions can help to embolden docents as they “walk through the mine field of tough topics” by making them feel secure and supported in their teaching. When controversy does arise, a docent should have the confidence to call upon a staff member for support, knowing that the staff member (educator, curator, or director) will come to that docent's aid.

Likewise, docents owe the same level of support to the institution in which they serve. Though they may not always be comfortable with every choice their institution makes, they should support it publicly. For instance, docents serving in contemporary arts institutions need not like, nor convince others to like, every work of art the museum chooses to exhibit. It remains the docent's duty, however, to support the museum's choice to present it, and each visitor's

right to examine it in an atmosphere that is both open and judgment-free.

A docent's use of language while teaching can also help or hinder when treading near tough topics. For instance, docents would be wise to avoid the use of judgmental words lest visitors adopt similar language. This is true even when the judgmental words are adopted in defense of the institution or exhibition. For example, the docent who defends a work of art as "great" or the artist as "well-respected" invites visitors to reply with equal, and perhaps opposite, judgments.

With some groups, docents may find that focusing on material evidence, rather than on concepts, can keep their lesson productive. For example, when working with groups that wish to avoid the topic of evolution, a docent teaching with dinosaur mounts might have visitors compare the physical attributes and dentition of these creatures rather than argue about their age or what they confirm about evolution.

Docents and other educators working in museums, zoos, and parks should not avoid tough topics just because they are emotionally charged or problematic. However, they can lead discussions in ways that respect and accommodate diverse opinions and that keep a time-constrained, limited encounter productive. To accomplish this, docents must receive frequent, intensive training, not only in subject-matter content but also in teaching methodology, from the institutions they volunteer to serve. It is only right that those who must walk among tough topics should be well-prepared — aware of the process and techniques that facilitate teaching, knowledgeable of the subject matter, informed as to their institution's philosophic stance, and confident of its support.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

Dear Reader

This issue on "Tough Topics" forced us to confront a few tough decisions of our own. The most crucial was whether to expand this issue to accommodate the many diverse and important articles we received.

Creating an expanded issue is a costly proposition for as small and young a publication as *The Docent Educator*. Nevertheless, we decided to go ahead with the expanded edition as a service to our readership and with the hope that the content of this issue might prompt more of our readers to become personal subscribers.

We estimate that each issue of *The Docent Educator* is read by seven-to-ten other people in addition to the subscriber. Though it is wonderful to have such an impact, a publication like this ultimately succeeds or fails based on its number of *subscribers*, not readers.

During our Autumn renewal period, we received many gratifying notes and letters telling us how much you enjoy and appreciate *The Docent Educator*. We thank you for them and ask but one favor in return ... *that you support our efforts by taking out your own subscription and by urging others in your organization do so, too.*

Institutions might consider providing complimentary subscriptions to each of their docents as an investment in their professional development and in the quality of the public services. To help defray costs, *The Docent Educator* offers a group rate. We discount our yearly subscription charge 20%, to \$16 per year, for 10 or more subscriptions mailed to a single address.

We ask for your help and active involvement! By gaining additional subscribers, we never need to hesitate to bring you all the information you should have to better teach in museums, historic homes, zoos, gardens, and parks.

Thank you for your understanding, concern, and support.

Back issues of *The Docent Educator* are now available!

To order your copies, request issues by volume, number, and title. Each back issue is \$9.00 (outside the U.S. add \$2.00 for postage and handling). Send your request, with check or money order, to: *The Docent Educator*, 2011 Eleventh Avenue East, Seattle, WA 98102-4109. (Sorry, we do not accept purchase orders, nor do we bill or invoice for back issues.)

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Staying Cool with Hot Issues

Engaging Young People in Tough Conversations

“... motivation and attention are increased when people (adults and youths) are involved in controversial issue discussions.”

To avoid controversy in education is to avoid active, meaningful learning; it reduces education to propaganda or indoctrination. The process of coming to terms with tough issues allows youth to drop assumptions and look beneath the surface of things. Practice in making choices and forming reasoned opinions allows youth to develop and refine critical thinking skills. Psychologist Howard Gardner, in his book *The Unschooled Mind*, calls on educators to use opportunities for “multiple stances” that develop the habit of looking at things from many different perspectives thereby increasing tolerance.

Reaching and relating to young people can be challenging even in the best of situations. Research shows, however, that motivation and attention are increased when people (adults and youths) are involved in controversial issue discussions. Where young people see a connection to their lives and futures, interest is high

Docent Strategies for Talking About Hot Issues

1. Explore your own emotions, biases, and beliefs related to the controversial issue and determine your comfort level. *Reserve the right not to tour exhibitions that address issues about which you cannot be objective.* Young people are sensitive and react to adult ambivalence and discomfort.
2. Research and discuss the controversy to better define the issue. Role play the various “sides” of an issue and identify the types of reasoning used for each viewpoint. This process allows for practice in facilitating discussions while providing an objective intellectual balance.

3. Understand what neutrality means in the context of controversial issue discussions. It is not an absence of personal opinion but a *withholding* until students can explore the issues for themselves. It also models the reflective, thoughtful approach to dealing with sensitive issues. If your personal view is expressed, give it with sound reasons and as only one reasoned opinion among other possible viewpoints. Students also need to see that opinions can be changed, so indicate if you ever had a different opinion that was later changed due to more information or experience.

4. Determine the focus and direction your discussion will take. Be sure you explain that focus to students. This will help keep the group on track

Discussion Activities To Use With Groups

Common Ground Questions

Set the stage for discussion with questions such as:

How do you feel when you try to explain something to someone who doesn't believe you?

Is it OK to change your mind about something? What does it take to change your mind? What are some things you used to believe but have found out are not true, or that you just don't believe anymore?

If something makes us sad or afraid or confused, is it OK to talk about it? Why or why not? Why might people be unwilling to talk about such topics?

Reasoning Role Cards

Develop role cards with a different viewpoint and supporting reasons written on each one. Ask students to take the viewpoint described on the card and contribute to the discussion based on that

role whether they agree with it or not. At closure, ask students for their *own* real opinions on the issue. Is it different or similar to their role card and why? Did anyone change or modify their opinion as a result of the discussion?

Token System

Encourage equal participation. Draw out reticent students and gently curb those who tend to dominate. One technique is to establish a *Token System*. Each student receives the same number of tokens which they "spend" on contributions to the discussion. Remember also to respect the rights of students who do not wish to take part in the discussion.

Thinking Rule

If one student is attacked by the others for his/her opinion, invoke the *Thinking Rule*. For 5 minutes everyone will think of reasons to support that person's opinion. This is a step or two in the other person's moccasins and defuses the tension.

Closure Process

Closure is essential. It is not enough to raise the issue. Students need positive support as they continue through the reasoning process. Review the main points of the issue, note how the discussion progressed, and identify areas of agreement and disagreement. The message here is that we can agree to disagree. If the discussion opened up some dark, potentially frightening or confusing aspects of life take time to point out the other side of the coin, the positive learning and growing that can come out of adversity.

Docent Notebook: Sample Discussion Outline

1. In this discussion, we will learn from what we all say so it is important to listen and not interrupt when others are speaking. Raise your hand to be recognized when you want to contribute to the discussion.
2. Everyone who has something to say will have a chance to speak. You do not have to offer your opinions if you do not want to.
3. When you contribute to the discussion, be sure you add something new that advances the discussion. Do not repeat what someone else has said.
4. Ideas, not people, will be discussed.
5. In this discussion we are looking not so much for answers to questions as for *good reasons* for your opinions.

An annotated bibliography of research sources used in this article is available for \$3.00 and a 9 x 12 self-addressed, stamped envelope with \$0.75 postage from: Marianna Adams, Curator of Education, Museum of Art, One East Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301-1807



Ku Klux Klan robe in Kentucky Historical Society exhibit "Faces of Change: Kentucky's Second Century." Robe on loan from The Kentucky Museum, Bowling Green.

photo: Nathan Prichard

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Cynthia Lee Moreno is the Associate Director at the Lexington Children's Museum in Lexington, KY. Previously she served as Assistant Curator of Education at the Tampa Museum of Art in Tampa, FL. She is a facilitator for school and community group workshops on conflict resolution and prejudice reduction.

The authors have made presentations on this subject for the American Association of Museums Conference and National Art Education Conference.

From Document to Drama:

Interpreting Slavery at Tryon Palace

Did Governor Tryon have slaves?" "What was the African-American experience in colonial North Carolina?"

As recently as 1990, visitors to Tryon Palace, the reconstructed colonial capitol of North Carolina, learned only sketchy answers to these questions. The original Palace was completed in 1770 for William Tryon, colonial governor of North Carolina from 1765-1771 and of New York from 1771-1780.

While documents recorded names of the English servants Governor Tryon brought to Brunswick, North Carolina, in 1764, and names of Tryon's servants in New York in 1773, there was no listing of Tryon's household while he lived at the Palace in New Bern from June 1770 to July 1771. As to Tryon's slave holding, there were only scattered references to Tryon owning a man named Surry, purchasing a man named Tom, and paying taxes on eight black males in Brunswick county.

With this limited evidence, we allowed ourselves a comfortable approach to slavery, admitting that the Governor owned slaves but suggesting that these slaves were probably on one of Tryon's other North Carolina properties. After all, we had no document that stated in so many words that there were slaves at the Palace. We didn't have a responsibility, we reasoned, to interpret the lives of people we couldn't prove were here.

But were we just letting ourselves

off on a technicality? True, we couldn't prove that Tom lived at the Palace. Tryon bought him while living in Brunswick in 1766 from James Murray, who "rejoice(d) to hear [that Tom] makes a good servant to so good a Master." Yet in 1773, when fire destroyed Tryon's New York home, housekeeper Patty Hatch gave her deposition that she "asked where was the Negro Tom, and she was told he was in the garret over the kitchen and she ran up and pulled him out of bed." Was this the same Tom? If he was with Tryon's household in Brunswick in 1766 and in New York in 1773, wasn't it likely that he was at the Palace in 1770 and 1771?

And what of Surry? He was advertised as a runaway in New Bern's *North Carolina Gazette* on July 25, 1777, described as "formerly the Property of Governor Tryon, and now belongs to the Estate of Isaac Edwards, deceased." Edwards had been Tryon's private secretary in New Bern. If Edwards purchased Surry, perhaps when Tryon moved to New York in 1771, might that not suggest that Surry, too, had been in New Bern? We still had no document proving Tom's or Surry's presence at the Palace, but the evidence we did have was too suggestive for us to continue to comfortably ignore slavery.

The rewriting of our living history drama tour for the Summer 1991 season offered a tantalizing opportunity; adding a slave character to the drama tour would introduce the topic of slavery to our visitors in an immediate, personal encounter. Rather than hearing a museum guide analyze the meaning of slavery in 18th-century society, visitors would hear a historical person speak for himself.

Conjectural personalities for Surry and Tom were drawn from the few documents we did have. Using James Murray's description of Tom as a "good

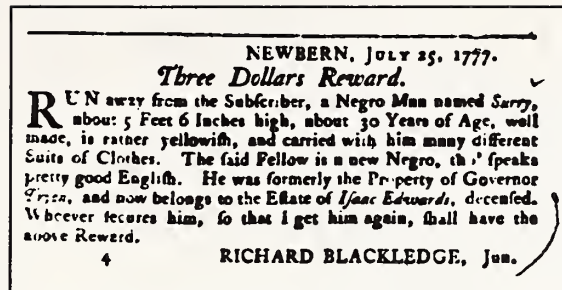


Derrick Parker portrayed the slave Surry in the 1992 Tryon Palace drama tour.

Servant” and Patty Hatch’s concern for Tom during the fire, we painted Tom as the favorite of the household — someone who dealt with slavery through outward compliance, whatever his inner feelings may have been. Relying on Surry’s runaway ad, which described him as a “new Negro” or native African, we depicted Surry as a strong-minded man who had experienced freedom and who would eventually take his chances to regain it. The contrast between these conjectural personalities for Tom and Surry hinted at the diversity of slaves’ responses to slavery.

The new drama tour, entitled “Away to Alamance: Governor Tryon and the Regulators,” was to focus on Governor Tryon’s 1771 suppression of backcountry riots against high taxes and corrupt local government. (Alamance was the site of the Regulators’ defeat.) At four different points in the Tryon Palace tour, visitors would encounter a character interpreter portraying one of the historical people involved in this conflict. We chose Surry to be the character who would introduce visitors to some of the realities of slave life as he loaded supplies for the Governor’s march to the back country.

Much of Surry’s monologue recounts conjectural conversations with Tome as Surry contemplates the upcoming move of the Tryon household to New York. When Surry has asked why Tom was chosen to go to New York, Tom has replied, “You know what the eleventh commandment be? Best was everyone mind his own business” (a line borrowed from period African-American humor, as reported in a South Carolina newspaper). In an impassioned moment, Surry declares that he can’t play the same compliant role that he sees Tom play: “I was born in Africa — I remember when nobody owned me but me.” Surry has learned that he is to be sold to Mr. Edwards, and confides to the visitors his intention to run away if Mr. Edwards proves to be a harsh master.



The advertisement for runaway slave Surry from the North Carolina Gazette, July 25, 1777.

The encounter ends as Surry wryly asks the visitors to remember, should the Governor or Mr. Edwards ask about him, “Best way everyone mind his own business.”

“Away to Alamance” completed its second season in 1992, and Surry proved to be the most popular character with visitors. Visitors liked listening to Surry because it “sounds like they’re getting the scuttlebutt,” according to Ron “Syki” Chapple, who portrayed Surry for two seasons. Visitors were left both laughing and thinking. Derrick Parker, who also played Surry in 1992, felt that “above all, it helped people understand or see some of the pains — emotional more so than physical — that slaves had to go through. You could see that people saw the pain, by the nodding or the look in their eyes.”

Both Chapple and Parker agreed that an African-American man could be their toughest audience member. “I would see in his face the same thing I would think,” said Parker, “what’s he doing up there in that slave suit?” Once it became apparent that the monologue was not attempting to perpetuate stereotypes, Parker thought he could see the man thinking, “You’re right, you’re teaching a very good lesson.”

Our efforts to interpret slavery have been “a very good lesson” for all of us at Tryon Palace. Having a character interpreter portray life under slavery has opened the door for our building interpreters to discuss slavery as well. Since the building interpreters were to introduce the Surry character and give a brief follow-up after his monologue, their training for the drama tour focused

on the documentation for Tom and Surry. A good follow-up interpretation was crucial; when visitors heard the character Surry contemplate running away, and then later learned from their Palace guides that the historical Surry did indeed run away, the visitors realized they had heard the story of an actual person.

It was initially a shock to many building interpreters to learn that we had rethought our interpretation of the historical evidence and that slavery would now be presented as part of the Palace story. After learning about the documentation in class, and seeing visitors’ appreciation of the Surry character on tours, most interpreters became comfortable with Surry. As one interpreter commented in a survey after the first season, “Let’s always keep the slave [character] — He is a source of knowledge not given [on] any other part of the tour.”

Putting words in the mouths of historical characters requires careful research as well as a healthy respect for the realities of past people’s lives. The real Surry and Tom who lived and died 200 years ago could probably find fault with the details of our presentation, but we hope they would look kindly on our attempt to remember their experiences, and the experiences of their enslaved brothers and sisters

Hilarie M. Hicks is Curator of Interpretation for Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens in New Bern, North Carolina, a campus of several historic structures including the reconstructed home of North Carolina’s colonial governor. She was the author/researcher for the living history drama tour “Away to Alamance: Governor Tryon and the Regulators.” An alumnus of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in History Museum Studies, she was formerly a historical interpreter for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Interpreting a Time of Slavery

“... we learned a great deal about our own anxieties, limitations, and strengths ...”

In preparing to write about the interpretation of slavery in museums, I came across a news clipping entitled, “Slavery: Museums Reveal Uncomfortable Truth of the Past.” The title alone struck several familiar chords associated with my own experience and that of the Museum’s staff in interpreting the sensitive and often highly-charged issue of slavery in America. While the impetus for our Museum’s expanded interpretation of slavery came in the form of an exhibition of slave life in the antebellum South, we recognized the necessity of evaluating our programs and tours to deal more honestly and forthrightly with the topic of slavery. As staff, we also realized that, while the transition towards a more inclusive interpretation of Southern history was needed, it would be at times uncomfortable for staff and visitors alike.

While revamping existing tours and developing new programs, we learned a great deal about our own anxieties, limitations, and strengths related to presenting the topic of slavery. As we searched to create a plan for interpreting slavery, we established strategies that combined traditional interpretative techniques with new methods tested in our tours. The following guidelines derived from our own experiences may prove helpful.

Getting Started

▲ **Dispel your myths.** Before you begin your reading, make a list of facts you know about the history of slavery in America and research each point for accuracy. Books on the topic of slavery written after 1965 tend to reflect the most recent scholarship and will be your best sources of information. Many of the “facts” we learned as students are

inaccurate and outdated. Read slave narratives and interviews that present the history of enslaved African-Americans *in their own words*. These sources are readily available in published books and periodicals.

▲ **Acknowledge any uneasiness** you have about presenting the topic of slavery. Create an outlet for discussion. Form a docent roundtable. One objective of the roundtable should be addressing difficult questions that you may encounter while giving tours. Keep a notebook with the questions and research answers for quick reference.

▲ **Ask the experts.** Invite museum professionals and other educators who have had experience interpreting slavery to visit with staff and speak to docents.

▲ **Visit other sites** that interpret African-American history. You may be surprised at the number of sites in your own backyard that have already incorporated the topic of slavery in their tours and programs. Marcella Thum’s *Hippocrene U.S.A. Guide to Black America* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1991) is an excellent resource listing historic sites in towns and cities across the United States.

▲ **Be able to articulate the reasons why your institution interprets slavery as part of its mission.** We receive numerous questions from visitors challenging our motives for interpreting slavery in our historic house and museum.

▲ **Balance your presentation.** It often becomes easy to focus only on those stories of individuals who overcame oppression by escaping to freedom. While you want students and other visitors to have a positive museum experience, you should remember that

they need to understand the realities of life for enslaved African-Americans. As an alternative, focus on survival strategies.

▲ **Practice.** Take trial runs. Become more comfortable by having other docents ask tough questions during your practice runs. Remember, the audience will only be as comfortable as you are.

Presenting Your Tour

▲ **Dispel their myths.** Understand your audience's perceptions and expectations. Before your tour, ascertain your group's knowledge of the history of slavery. Asking questions at the beginning of the tour allows you to clarify any misconceptions as you proceed on the tour.

▲ **Be straightforward** when answering visitors' questions. Students and other visitors often test docents by asking the most difficult questions at the beginning of the tour, particularly when the subject is controversial. Avoiding questions, or giving evasive answers, is the first step toward losing credibility.

▲ **Avoid role-playing activities.**

Remain sensitive to the personal history of slavery. Avoid using first person questions, such as "If you had been a slave ...?" It is better to ask visitors to think about what life might have been like for an enslaved individual. Avoid role-play that places an individual in the position of enslavement. You risk trivializing the serious and sensitive nature of the topic.

▲ **Be flexible** in your means of interpretation. The history of slavery in the United States is an uncomfortable subject for many visitors, regardless of race. Be willing to adapt your interpretation to meet the diverse attitudes of each tour group. Remember, however, that changing the *means* of interpretation does not mean changing the *content* of your interpretation. For instance, when students upset with our



A student looks at neck-waist-wrist manacles (ca. 1830-60) in the exhibition "Before Freedom Came."

exhibition's content did not want to tour it, we modified our plans and held a roundtable discussion in another area. In this case, meeting the needs of the students was more important than completing the tour as it was planned.

▲ **Be receptive** to broadening your interpretation to discuss recent events in history. During a discussion on the limited rights of free African-Americans in the antebellum South, one student offered an account of how his father was refused the use of a water fountain in the segregated South. While the connections between the past and recent history need to be clarified for students, learning how to weave oral history shared by students into your presentation will greatly enhance the effectiveness of your tour.

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Sheryl Kingery is the Coordinator of Education at The Museum and White House of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia. She developed educational programs for the Museum's exhibition "Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South" and authored "Before Freedom Came: A Teacher's Resource Packet." Ms. Kingery earned her undergraduate degree in anthropology from the University of Virginia and her graduate degree in museum education from the College of William and Mary.

Teaching Evolution

*“Unfortunately,
no matter how benignly
we present evidence,
some individuals
may believe
that we are trying to
change their minds
or attack
their religious ideals.”*

What do “Animal Rights,” “Bigfoot,” “Cannibalism Controversy,” “Genetic Engineering,” “Infanticide,” “Nazis, Evolutionary Program of,” “Social Darwinism,” and “Spiritualism” have in common? They are all entries in *The Encyclopedia of Evolution* by Richard Milner (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1990, p. 481). When people associate so many varied and inflammatory issues with evolution, to expect anything but controversy to accompany its teaching would be naive!

Docents teaching about biology, geology, and paleontology must be well prepared during docent training sessions to deal with the controversy surrounding this issue. They should not find themselves unprepared for a confrontation they did not anticipate or that they were not trained to handle.

The Official Museum Position Statement

The first step in preparing the museum and docents for the potential controversy surrounding evolution is to have an official museum position statement on the issue. The science, education, marketing, development, and other key departments, staff, and trustees should have input into its development and there should be institutional “buy-in” on it. This way, docents and staff know what will be supported in their work with the public. Docent training should include a discussion of this statement. Docents should understand, however, that having a policy on teaching evolution will not prevent the controversy, and since docents are on the “front line” with the public, they are likely to be the ones who encounter any difficulties most directly.

At the Denver Museum of Natural History, we allow creationist groups to

take their own tours of the gallery, as long as they are not disruptive and do not distribute any written materials to other visitors. Some people are disturbed by this policy, because other visitors may hear the creationist-oriented guide discussing an exhibit in a manner that is at odds with the museum’s scientific perspective and could mistake this person for a museum representative. However, visitors will sometimes comment incorrectly about exhibits to other visitors, and it is neither possible nor desirable that the museum stifle their conversation. Rather, having museum staff and volunteers clearly identified is important in limiting mistaken identity. Some museums even have signs indicating how visitors can recognize museum staff and volunteers.

Guides at the Denver Museum of Natural History often call teachers before conducting school tours to find out what the particular interests are and how the students are being prepared for their visit. They inform teachers that evolution will be covered in their tour. This allows a teacher to elect not to take a guided tour or to give parents who have objections the option of keeping their children home.

The Role of the Docent as Educator

Docents need to understand that it is not their responsibility to “convince” or “persuade” visitors that evolution is “true” or that others should “believe” in it. Our role as educators is to inform visitors about biological concepts, fossil evidence, and the scientific interpretation of the evidence. It is the visitor’s job to take this information and use it in forming his or her own beliefs and ideas.

As educators, we want to encourage people to be careful observers and critical thinkers. We aren’t there to tell

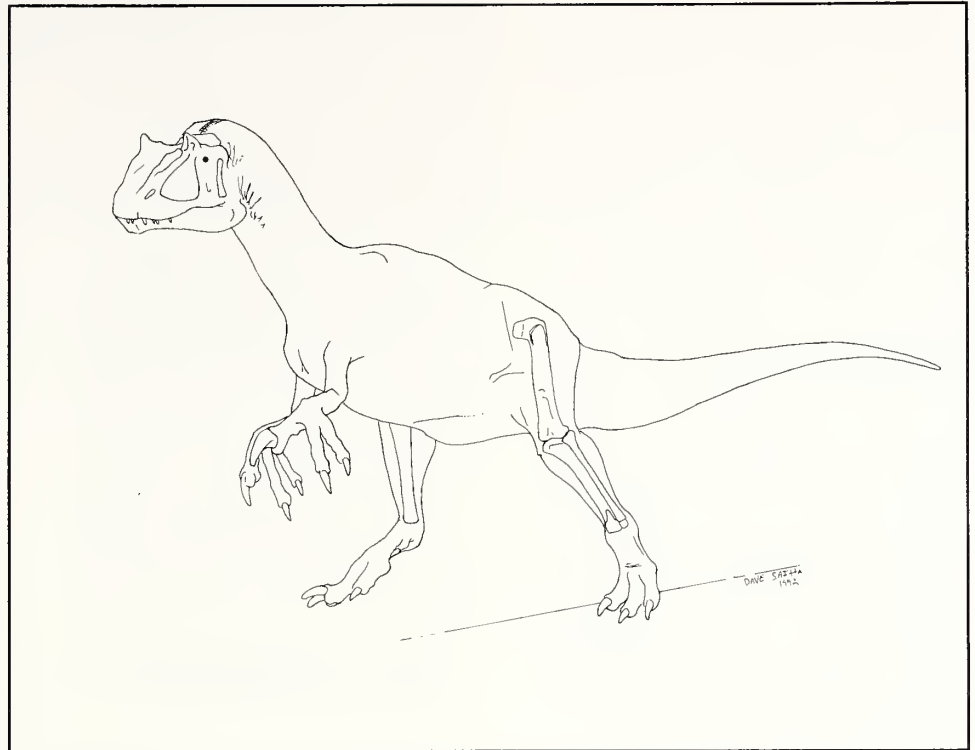
them what to think, but to give them information and assistance in gathering information about the natural world that they can use to synthesize their own views. What people believe is beyond parameters of our responsibility.

It can be frustrating for docents when visitors let them know that they just don't believe what they're being taught. Docents should realize, however, that this is okay and it does not mean they have failed in their responsibility.

Unfortunately, no matter how benignly we present evidence and its scientific interpretation, some individuals will feel threatened and may believe that we are trying to change their minds or attack their religious ideals. Some visitors may even attempt to force docents to defend their own personal beliefs. For example, docents have been asked by visitors to fossil exhibits, "Do you believe in the Bible?" and "Have you been saved?"

Docents do not need to defend their personal beliefs to visitors. When a docent recognizes that a visitor is not genuinely interested in learning and discussing the scientific evidence, but only in arguing and disrupting the tour, the docent should be prepared to say that he or she was trained to present a scientific perspective while representing the museum, and that the visitor is welcome to talk to a staff member about the accuracy or appropriateness of this material.

Role playing exercises with docents taking the roles of creationist visitors who press the docent on different issues might help docents identify effective and appropriate responses to questions and gain experience handling these types of confrontations.



Drawing by Dave Saitta, a 17 year-old senior at Horizon High School in Thornton, CO.

There are visitors who may be genuinely confused or distressed that the information a docent presents conflicts with what they have learned from other sources. This is especially true of children who have not been introduced to evolution before. It is important that docents be sensitive to visitors' feelings and encourage them to pursue answers to their personal questions in forums other than the museum, as the docent is only trained and prepared to discuss the scientific perspective.

Docents who hold creationist beliefs themselves should not be required to teach concepts with which they fundamentally disagree. They should be encouraged to docent in areas that do not require discussion of evolution. They should also understand that if they choose to work in areas requiring discussion of evolution that they will be expected to present the information in a manner acceptable to the scientific perspective and educational goals of the museum.

***"It is important
that docents be
sensitive to
visitors' feelings
and encourage them
to pursue answers to
their personal questions
in forums other
than the museum."***

Training should address the Evidence for Evolution

Science begins with observations of the natural world, in other words ... evidence. Evolutionary theory and the evidence supporting it should be the primary subject covered in docent training. Your museum's curators of biology, paleontology, and/or geology should serve as your primary resources. You might also want to obtain Norman D. Newell's 1984 pamphlet, *"Why Scientists Believe in Evolution,"* published by the American Geological Institute, and use it as a basis for planning your discussion.

Target Misconceptions about Evolution

- *"It's just a theory."* Literature written by leading biologists, geologists, and paleontologists refers to evolution as fact. The "theory of evolution" was a hypothesis developed by Charles Darwin and others in the 1800's attempting to explain observations of the natural world. "Evolutionary theory" is the body of statements describing a known natural phenomena — evolution.

- *"Scientists don't know how old the Earth is because radiocarbon dating has been proven inaccurate."* Radiocarbon (carbon-14) dating techniques have been

adjusted and updated with use over time. However, radiocarbon dating is only useful for things under 50,000 years old. There are many other types of radiometric dating that date things over 50,000 years old and can date things billions of years old. It is important to stress that radiometric dating is based on known laws of chemistry and physics that are applied to many problems of modern technology and are not just ideas related to dating the Earth and understanding evolution.

- *"There aren't any transitional forms in the fossil record."* Actually, there are myriad "transitional forms" in the fossil record including the well-documented sequence of evolution from reptiles to mammal-like reptiles to mammals and the one from dinosaurs to birds. Evolution is a mosaic — a group of animals evolving from one group to another will not always display features exactly intermediate between the two.

Tour and Presentation Techniques: Focusing on the Evidence

Effective tours and presentations incorporate participatory techniques such as hands-on specimens and questioning whenever possible. These techniques are especially important when teaching about evolution. Concentrate on the evidence. Use skeletons on exhibit and

touch carts and tour baskets with fossils and specimens of modern organisms to illustrate evolutionary events and processes. Let visitors directly and tactilely explore the evidence. Discuss abstract concepts like geologic time using concrete representations or models, like a 20-foot timeline made of string or by relating geologic time to a calendar year. Allow visitors to hypothesize about the functions of features on skulls of fossils and modern animals. Let the visitor be the scientist, drawing conclusions based on evidence. If you can just start the visitor thinking about natural history, your tour is a success.

In conclusion, the docent's best tool for dealing with any controversy is to have a clear grasp of the subject and an understanding of the controversy itself. There are many references available on the controversy surrounding evolution, and a good resource library on the topic is important for museums dealing with this subject. Docents must also know that they have the firm support of the museum's staff and trustees in educating the public about sensitive issues.

Publish Your Teaching Ideas and Techniques *Submit an Article!*

The Docent Educator welcomes your articles, questions, techniques, comments, and announcements for possible publication. Interested? Please consider addressing the themes of our upcoming issues.

Thematic Teaching: *Great Themes that Provide Cohesiveness and Pizzazz*
Autumn 1993
submission deadline: June 1, 1993

Little Ones: *Teaching our Youngest Visitors* - Winter 1993
submission deadline: Sept. 1, 1993

Program Mechanics: Recruitment, Training, and Evaluation
Spring 1994
submission deadline - Dec. 1, 1993

Blockbusters: Teaching with Traveling Exhibitions
Summer 1994
Submission deadline - March 1, 1994

Have an article, technique, or activity in mind that does not conform to the themes above? You are still invited to submit it for consideration. Send SASE for writer's guidelines to *The Docent Educator* 2011 Eleventh Avenue East, Seattle, WA 98102.

Rebecca L. Smith is the Earth Sciences Educator at the Denver Museum of Natural History. She is a member of the Museum's triad management team and interpretative team for "Prehistory Journey," the Museum's innovative permanent exhibit hall on the history of life on Earth, which opens in the Fall of 1995. She is also co-principal investigator for the National Science Foundation grant that is partially funding "Prehistory Journey." Prior to her work in Denver, Ms. Smith was an Education Specialist at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History, where she coordinated the New Mexico Rural Science Education Project, training teachers throughout the state to use their local natural resources to teach science. Ms. Smith has also been a docent for the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and the Utah Children's Museum. Ms. Smith earned her M.A. in Biological Anthropology from the University of New Mexico.

Answering Tough Questions in Science

George F. Smoot III, an astrophysicist at the University of California's Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, recently made one of this century's most important scientific discoveries. He and his research team uncovered the first evidence of the formation of primordial structures from the universe's creation.

Essentially, Smoot and his crew produced a map of the ancient universe showing temperature fluctuations in the radiation left over from the "big bang," the explosion that scientists believe

created the universe some 15 billion years ago. To reach and confirm their findings, Smoot and his team persevered through painstaking computer analysis of more than 300 million measurements taken by a NASA satellite launched in 1989.

Though Smoot's discovery and subsequent statement ("If you're religious, it's like looking at God.") have been controversial among some fundamentalist groups, Smoot says he sees no inconsistency between his team's results and religious ideas of creation.

"Anytime you solve a question like this, you raise two more," he said. "The big bang was the creation event 15 billion years ago and it can be argued that God created it."

A member of Smoot's research team, George Lineweaver, added, "The scientific story of creation that we're talking about is incomplete. In science whenever you answer a question you create two more, so that, in a sense, the unknown gets larger. If you invoke God in that unknown, there will always be something for God to do in science."

Congratulations to N.C. State U.

Kudoes to the eight-acre arboretum at North Carolina State University for winning the 1992 award for the nation's best public garden.

The American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta recognized the school's programs in botanical education, plant introduction, and research as models for all public gardens.

The arboretum contains 6,000 varieties of plants from 42 countries, including 450 different kinds of daffodils.

Priorities

According to a national poll of 1991 college freshmen, published by the American Council on Education:

- only 15.8% considered making a theoretical contribution to science an important objective;
- only 11.3% considered creating artist work an important objective;
- while, 73.7% considered being "financially very well off" to be an important objective.

Public Criticisms of Art Museums

On Sunday, December 13, 1992, the *New York Times* reported the results of a Getty Center for Education in the Arts survey defining the perceptions of museumgoers. The following is the sampling they published:

- "People did not linger in the 20th-century galleries. They went through fast."
- "When I asked the guard a question, I was referred to the information desk."
- "[Some of] the art looked like something I could have done myself."
- "The signs were all very uniform. They were almost like an eye test they were so small."
- "How many times do you want to look at Buddah? Boring."
- "Toward the end it got monotonous."

The editors of *The Docent Educator* believe that docents are the best and most available resource museums have to overcome many of these problems and to improve the quality of museum visits. Though labels and handouts can do the *telling*, only docents can do the *teaching*. While the curatorial staff can prepare labels, only educators can provide visitors with what they truly seek from the experience of visiting art museums ... a communion with art through developed viewing skills and interactive contemplation of the works.

Giving Girls an Even Break



photo: Anne Berry
Clarksville-Montgomery County Museum

Twenty years ago, Title IX of the Education Amendments made sex discrimination in education illegal. Although Title IX has improved educational equity for women and girls, recent studies report that gender bias still exists and still limits choices for half of the school population. While not the primary educational institution for children, museums nonetheless should do all they can to insure equity for girls in their educational programs.

In "Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America," a landmark study commissioned by the American Association of University Women in 1991, a number of significant findings centering on self-esteem came to light. The survey of three thousand girls and boys throughout the United States discovered that, although both sexes suffer a significant loss of self-esteem during adolescence, the loss is most dramatic and most long-lasting in girls.

The survey also found that girls are less likely than boys to feel they are "pretty good at a lot of things." Their lower self-esteem reflects a lack of confidence in their own talents. And,

perhaps most alarming, girls are less likely than boys to believe that their career dreams can come true.

A major cause of this loss of self-esteem, unfortunately, can be attributed to the gender bias girls encounter in educational institutions.

Much of the damage of gender bias comes about unintentionally, and teachers who have allowed themselves to be videotaped as part of an awareness program have been astonished to see examples in their classrooms. In a video of her science class, for example, a teacher heard herself telling a girl student not to help with the

science demonstration because "... Johnny needs to know how to do this." The unintentional message: "You don't need to know how as much as he does." A primary teacher saw herself showing the boys in her room how to use the stapler but taking the stapler from the girls to staple for them. The unintentional message again, "You don't need to know how."

Studies reported in "How Schools Shortchange Girls," the follow-up report commissioned by the AAUW and researched by the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, indicated that teachers communicate more with boys than with girls. Teachers ask boys more complex, abstract, and open-ended questions. Teachers give boys more detailed instructions, but are more likely to take over and finish projects for girls. Teachers criticize boys for lack of effort when work is not done satisfactorily; a lack of similar criticism for girls implies that effort wouldn't make any difference.

"Much of the damage of gender bias comes about unintentionally ..."

What can museum docents do to insure equity for girls in their teaching? In many cases, they can offer exactly the kinds of things girls need most ... and the kinds of things missing in many American classrooms.

▲ Provide hands-on, experiential learning when possible. Science, in particular, demands exploration and risk-taking, behaviors that are often more encouraged and accepted in boys than girls. Equal access to the tools of science is not available in most schools. By third grade, for example, 51 percent

of the boys and 37 percent of the girls had used a microscope. By eleventh grade, 49 percent of the boys and only 17 percent of the girls had ever used an electricity meter. Science museums, zoos, and nature centers are much better able to offer

science exploration than most school classrooms.

▲ Create cooperative, collaborative learning environments. The accepting atmosphere of a museum experience, where all ideas are welcome and competition is at a minimum, is the environment where girls excel. Same-sex groups avoid the competition girls often encounter when working with boys. When girls and boys work together in cooperative groups, care should be taken to insure that roles are assigned so girls are not always the secretary/recorder and boys the president/leader.

▲ Provide role models. Meeting and working with scientists, artists, and



photo: Anne Berry
Clarksville-Montgomery County Museum

historians of both sexes in real-life situations reduces the negative stereotypes that are one aspect of gender bias.

▲ Present art and history in their cultural contexts. Help children to see both men and women as integral parts of the fabric of life within a culture or period of history. When women are portrayed in stereotypical poses, as in much 19th century art, explain the context in which the art was produced.

▲ Work with organizations such as Girls, Inc., Girl Scouts of America, and the American Association of University Women to offer out-of-school programs to narrow the "experience" gap.

▲ Build confidence. More than any other variable, self-confidence is most highly correlated with academic performance. A drop in confidence, in fact, actually precedes a decline in math performance. By monitoring their own behavior, docents can do much to remove gender bias from their educational programs and help girls gain the confidence necessary to achieve their dreams.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

It Works for Me ...

Docents share techniques they find successful.

Perhaps you've heard of a museum without walls. They do exist! BUT, what would you say about a museum without walls, roof, or even a floor? We've had just such a situation here in Santa Cruz, California, for several years now.

Back in 1981, The Art Museum of Santa Cruz County began with the idea of providing our community with its very first contemporary art museum. The space was donated by the county library; the location was perfect and we were off to a great start. Things went very well in this location for about six years, when alas, much to our disappointment, the library felt they needed more space to expand. By this time we were busily engaged in art museum functions and activities, including docent tours and children's workshops. We had a full board of dedicated trustees, 100 volunteers, and over 900 members!

Reluctantly we pulled up stakes, moving our administrative offices to another location. Even before we were settled in, we were notified the building was to be demolished to make room for a parking lot! Another move was in order.

Finally, luck smiled on us and we were offered a fine space for both offices and gallery in an ideal location. Staff, volunteers, and museum members pitched in and the community rallied around us. That was June 1989. In October, the Loma Prieta earthquake struck. You guessed it, the building was red tagged and condemned — "unsafe."

As the dust settled and people began to pull out of the rubble, we were again able to find space for administrative offices. New plans began to emerge. Our museum joined forces with a historical museum. The community and businesses joined us in an effort to raise 7.5 million dollars with which to build what is to be known as "The McPherson Center for Art and History."

During this difficult period in our history, our Board of Trustees, volunteers, and staff members worked

unceasingly on fundraising events and membership drives. The institution relied heavily on art education to see us through this period of "zero exhibition" space. We conducted art tours of the community, held lecture series, film series, and children's workshops. We were determined to keep our image alive within our county of 232,500 citizens.

Our most successful endeavor came about in the form of a 38' tractor-trailer rig (an old moving van) which was donated by one of our business members. The rig was converted into what is now a traveling art education program, better known as the "Art Box," a mobile museum on wheels.

As this "Art Box" moved through the county, the community maintained its interest in our programs. Over 4,000 school children visited our mobile museum and participated in this program. In these times of school cutbacks and diminished curriculum, the Art Box offered much needed art opportunities for elementary students.

The unrelenting effort to keep and maintain an art museum image and program (with no walls) through difficult times, compounded by a major California earthquake, has exceeded our expectations. Just last July, we stood and watched while the concrete foundation was poured and the steel beams were raised on the new McPherson Center for Art and History.

The Art Museum of Santa Cruz County is living proof that by holding fast to dreams and goals, and keeping an educational theme alive, all things are possible. It worked for us ... soon we, too, will have a roof, walls, floors, and windows. Soon we, too, will have it all!

Jeanne Bates, docent
Dorothy Rose, Volunteer Coordinator
The Art Museum of Santa Cruz County
Santa Cruz, CA

The Naked Truth

Or How to Respond to the Tell-Tale Giggle

“Many kids have heard the explanation that, ‘the human body is a thing of beauty,’ but it doesn’t satisfy them because they can’t understand it.”

It might be the tell-tale giggles you hear rippling through the class as you travel from one point to another on your tour. It could be their quiet gasps as students round a corner and come face-to-face with a Rodin sculpture. Or, you may get a direct question from an innocent-looking little girl in the back row. Sooner or later, kids on your school tour will let you know they have a question. “Why are there so many pictures of naked people in the museum?”

Elementary school children are genuinely embarrassed at being confronted with nudity in works of art, and you have probably noticed that the more sexually explicit the nude, the more seductive the pose, the more uncomfortable the children become. We need tactics for creating discussions with kids that will both allay some of their anxieties about the subject (expressed through giggles or gasps) and communicate our respect for the work of artists who create nudes. Each docent must come up with his or her own set of answers for children, but keep in mind the ideas below as you think through your responses.

You can skip the nudes. One way of dealing with students’ embarrassment is to leave nudes out of your tour. If you do include them, or cannot avoid including them, try to be selective. Some works cause so much embarrassment in children that you cannot teach from them.

You don’t have to make a big deal about it. Dealing with the issue of nudes in art head-on (so to speak) may take up a lot of valuable time on your tour. One option is simply to ignore the giggles and gasps. For students in grades K - 3, this may be the best response. They cannot really understand why people paint nudes, so a simple acknowledgment of their feelings like, “We sometimes see

things in museums that embarrass us, don’t we?” may be your best bet.

Make the answer fit the child. Many kids have heard the explanation that, “the human body is a thing of beauty,” but it doesn’t satisfy them because they can’t understand it. They are too young to think of the human body in such a detached, or philosophical, way. Here are some alternatives you might try:

❖ The answer varies from culture to culture. In African art, for example, figures are almost always shown at least partially nude, in part because this is how people in hot climates dressed. In Chinese art, there is far less nudity. Chinese painters concentrate on nature, instead of the human figure (clothed or unclothed), as their main subject. In the Western European tradition, the art of Ancient Greece has long been held as a model for artists to follow. In Greek society, the human body was highly revered, and Greeks painted and sculpted the nude often. (This answer is particularly helpful for groups who have religious or cultural strictures against showing the body. Museums show things from many cultures, and from these objects we can learn something about how people think and feel, even if we disagree with their values.)

❖ Paintings or sculptures of nudes create a sense of timelessness. If you notice, most of the paintings in the museum show people with their clothes on. In those paintings, we can guess the time period and country of the people depicted by the clothes they wear. Some people say that paintings of nudes, by contrast, are timeless. Without clothes, the person can belong to almost any time or place.

❖ Remind young people how difficult it is to draw figures. Most kids draw a dress or pants and a shirt for the body,

because it is easier than trying to make the legs look like real legs. It is hard enough to make hands and face look real. The human figure is technically one of the greatest challenges an artist can undertake. Imagine painting or sculpting skin, veins, muscles, skeletal structure, posture, proportion, as well as trying to communicate an idea, all without being able to use straight lines or bright colors!

❖ Perhaps the most honest answer of all is to admit that children probably cannot understand all the reasons nudes are painted and sculpted. Elementary school-aged children do not understand sexual attraction, even if they are aware of it. They do not admire other people's bodies. These are adult feelings. For the most part nudes were made by adult artists expecting adult viewers to look at them. You might try saying something like this...

"Art museums are 'grown-up' places. Kids are welcome and we love to have them come here, but it is not like Sesame Street or Disney World. When you come to art museums, however, you see adult things; things like war, death, and nudity. These are subjects adults think about. I know that looking at nudes embarrasses you, but if you visit art museums, and I hope we see you here a lot, you just have to get used to it."

This last answer seems to have a particularly calming effect on students.



Spring John La Farge (American, 1835-1910)
Philadelphia Museum of Art (gift of Charles S. Payson)

It's almost as if they are relieved to be given permission to not understand why there are nudes depicted in art.

As children grow, questions about nudity change but they do not disappear. High school students ask, "Why are the women so fat?" or "Why are there mostly female nudes?" With older children we can begin to introduce more sophisticated ideas about nudes. In African sculpture, for example, the female body is often used as a symbol of agrarian fertility. In Hindu art the sexual union of male and female is seen as a metaphor for the union a devotee seeks with his god. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Picasso shocked the

art world with his violation of the female form in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and at the height of the twentieth century abstraction painting the nude was considered a rebellious act.

Like so many things kids ask about, "Why are there so many pictures of naked people in the museum?" turns out to be a question with many layers of answers. The challenge is to come up with a response that both satisfies kids at their current level of understanding and also leaves the door open for further exploration.

Note - The author wishes to thank museum teachers Amy Jared, Tori Vannes, Carol Losos, and Ms. Purnell's 5th grade class from Highland Park School for sharing their ideas on this subject.

Marla Shoemaker is the Associate Curator of Education for Youth and Family Programs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Ms. Shoemaker is frequent lecturer/presenter at museum conferences throughout the country and was named the "1992 Outstanding Pennsylvania Museum Art Educator of the Year" by the Pennsylvania Art Education Association. Ms. Shoemaker authored the article "Watching Children Grow: A Guide to Childhood Development" in the Autumn 1992 issue of *The Docent Educator*.

Difficult Subjects at the Zoo

by Terry O'Conner

“Let’s suppose you arrive at the next stop on your tour and the animals you are observing begin mating. What would you say?”

As zoos have evolved from places of recreation to institutions whose primary mission is wildlife conservation, the role of interpreters teaching within zoos has expanded. Today, docents and other educators are frequently called upon to interpret more challenging and complex issues as they share this new vision of the zoo with visitors.

Differences in life experiences and perceptions influence the way people feel about the zoo and animals. Docents should be prepared to look at the zoo from the visitor’s perspective in order to achieve their goals as interpreters ... that is to help visitors have an enjoyable zoo experience, gain a greater understanding and appreciation of wildlife, and learn about the zoo and its purpose.

Because zoos have living collections, the experience of viewing animals is always a dynamic one, enabling visitors to observe all aspects of life. The animals may or may not be on view, or they may be engaging in behaviors such as mating, aggression, or eating, which in some visitors (especially younger ones) may evoke an emotional response.

Let’s examine several of the more challenging topics and situations that a zoo interpreter can encounter with visitors and explore productive ways of working through them.

Where are the animals?

Once places where animals were viewed in inadequate, sterile enclosures, modern zoos have developed innovative exhibitions that now present animals within the context of their environment, emphasizing naturalistic settings and suitable social groups. These naturalistic settings allow visitors to see animals within an appropriate context, while facilitating their understanding of animals as an integral part of a complex and fragile ecosystem. Though these

improvements benefit animals and visitors alike, they allow animals shelter and places of camouflage where they can retreat from, or be missed by, onlookers.

Visitors may express understandable frustration if they are unable to see their favorite animals immediately. What do you do in this instance? If there is a management reason why the animals are not on view, such as the introduction of a potential new mate, let the visitors know. This provides a great opportunity to discuss exciting changes at the zoo. If the animals are temporarily out of sight, you can help resolve disappointment by explaining the benefits of the exhibit designs for the animals. You can also encourage visitors to look for signs of the animals’ presence through tracks, nests, and so forth. Such observation techniques will teach visitors to observe patiently. You might also suggest times when visitors can return to observe typical peak activity periods.

Mating

Let’s suppose you arrive at the next stop on your tour and the animals you are observing begin mating. What would you say? Your response should depend upon the age and comfort level of your group. This may be the ideal time to explain the zoo’s role in captive breeding programs, but you can always begin by interpreting the most observable behaviors. For example, in a troop of monkeys you might ask visitors to determine what the others are doing. This can lead to discussions about the social organization of the group. Or, you could discuss the breeding history of the animals at the zoo and its significance, as well as the species’ status in the wild (are they classified as threatened or endangered?).

When people assign human characteristics to animals or judge them by human standards of acceptable behavior (anthropomorphism) they may find that animal behavior challenges their

sense of decorum. In this situation, a docent's facts and anecdotes, as well as his or her demeanor, can diffuse any discomfort. If you talk about the animal's behavior rather than avoid it, the reaction will very likely subside. Young children may find the situation funny, bewildering, or curious. Once again, it is you who can set the stage. Allow parents and teachers to assist with explanations if they wish. "These animals are mating so they can have babies" is a helpful response.

Why don't you release animals back into the wild?

You may have encountered zoo visitors who indicate their ambivalence toward, or even opposition to, the existence of zoos. Committed as we are to supporting the important work of zoos, this reaction may be hard for us to understand, and therefore one of the more challenging issues to interpret.

People may dislike zoos based on their past experiences viewing animals in demeaning cages, and they may now be reassured by your explanation of advances in zoo exhibition design and plans for future improvements, as well as by learning about the scope of the zoo's work. Other visitors may have concerns about maintaining endangered species in captivity. If there are so few of these animals left in the wild, why are zoos keeping them?

Here is an opportunity to discuss the need for habitat protection. If such environmental conditions as the drastic loss of natural habitat are prevalent, release is not viable. Until this trend is reversed, zoos breed animals in captivity to help maintain biological diversity. Species Survival Plans (SSP) are cooperative breeding programs for selected endangered species coordinated through the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums. The goal of these propagation programs for rapidly-disappearing species, such as the lowland gorilla, Sumatran tiger, black rhinoceros, and Bali mynah, is to produce a stable, genetically healthy captive population. In some situations, notably with the golden lion tamarin from Brazil's Atlantic coast rain forest, successful reintroduction of captive-born animals to a protected habitat is possible. For other critically endangered species, however, zoos may be their last hope for survival.

Zoo interpretation

The best preparation for interpreting difficult subjects at the zoo is to be aware of your own feelings about these topics and to practice explaining them to others. Once you've gathered all the information you think you will need, you may want to tour with a partner or group of docents, anticipating visitor reactions and questions, and practicing how you would respond. At the Woodland Park Zoo, we found it helpful during docent

training to try this exercise while touring zoo exhibits rather than in the classroom.

In a previous issue of *The Docent Educator* ("Priorities for Docent Training," Autumn 1992) the editors recommended that the first priority in a docent training program should be to teach the purpose of the institution. Having a clear understanding of the mission of your zoo — its programs and policies — is essential for you to be an effective interpreter.

Interpreting challenging subjects *can* be a rewarding experience. As educational institutions, zoos help to establish the vital connection between the animals on view and their wild counterparts, encouraging visitor action in support of protecting wild habitats. An encounter with a zoo docent can provide reassurance to zoo visitors as well as a meaningful experience, and ultimately foster in them a further commitment to conservation. You'll probably never know how often this happens, but your work *does* make a difference.

Terry O'Connor is Curator of Education at Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, where she manages education program development and trains both teachers and docents. Ms. O'Connor is actively involved in the Museum Educators of Puget Sound and is a member of the Public Education Committee for the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums.

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The workshop presenter is Gayle M. Southworth. Ms. Southworth is an experienced classroom teacher, a trainer for the *SWRL Elementary Art Program*, and has worked in museum education and docent training for the Honolulu Academy of Arts, the Witte Memorial Museum, the McNay Art Institute, and the Smithsonian Institution.

The cost of the one-day workshop is \$1,500. This includes presenter's fees, all expenses, and workshop materials. If you have questions or would like to schedule a workshop, please contact Shari Bradley:

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